Active Listening Skills

Active listening is a way of listening and responding that focuses attention on the speaker and helps improve mutual understanding. When people talk with one another, they don't always listen attentively. Especially in conflict situations, people tend to focus on how they will respond to win their point, not on understanding the perspective of the other person.

Issues can't really begin to be addressed until each person feels that important information has been heard and understood. What has happened? How have they been affected? What is important about the situation for them?

It is necessary for each person to suspend judgment so that they can be open to listening to the perspective of the other person. If both parties can do this, the chance of solving a mutual problem becomes much greater.

Important Concepts to Remember

The next time someone comes to you with a concern, begin your part of the conversation by asking that person some **introductory questions** to help them tell their story. For example:

- Tell me what happened from your perspective?
- How have you been affected?
- How do you see this situation?

While the other person is talking use these good listening behaviors:

- Face the speaker directly
- Do not interrupt
- Pay attention to the speaker's non verbal communication
- Pay attention to your own non verbal communication

When the other person has finished **summarize**, in your own words, what you have heard the other party say. For example:

- I hear you saying ... Is that right?
- Let me review what I've heard you say. Please correct me if I leave anything out.
- So far I have heard you say this ... Is that right? Have I missed anything? If you haven't gotten it quite right the speaker will give you immediate feedback.

Get more information about the other person's perspective by drawing them out with **clarifying** questions. Avoid rhetorical questions that indicate you have already reached a conclusion. Also be cautious of the word "why". It most often sounds accusatory or judgmental. Try the following examples instead:

- Could you tell me more about ...?
- What bothers you most about this situation?
- What led you to that conclusion?

Validate the other person's point of view. You can show that you understand a person's point of view without agreeing with them. Try to name the party's feelings without judgment and rephrase in neutral terms. For example:

- I hear that you are very frustrated (aggravated, disturbed, annoyed, bothered, irritated, etc.) with (name). Is that right?
- I understand that you feel ______. Is that right?

• I am interested in hearing more about this situation from your perspective.

Developing good active listening skills has several benefits.

- It enables people to listen attentively and sincerely to the other person.
- It avoids misunderstandings, as people can confirm that they really understand what another person has said.
- It tends to open people up, to get them to say more.

Active listening is a skill, and like all skills, takes practice to develop. The next time you are involved in a conflict, try active listening and see if it doesn't help.